

# Researching African American History

Beth L. Savage

This fall, The Preservation Press of the National Trust for Historic Preservation will publish the National Park Service's new book celebrating over 800 historic properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places for associations with African American history. The book is a project of the National Register, developed in cooperation with the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers. It will feature descriptive information on the individual properties, contextual essays, geographical and topical indices, and selected illustrations and photographs. As a way to introduce minority graduate students to the National Register as a research tool, and to introduce them to public history and historic preservation as viable career opportunities, three students were employed through paid internships to work on the book. Faculty from the Public History program at Howard University, the Afro-American History Department at the University of Maryland, and the American Studies Department at The George Washington University sponsored the students and served as project advisors.

The documentation for the book was developed from National Register nomination documentation using the National Register Information System (NRIS) and adding project-specific information through the use of the Integrated Preservation Software (IPS). The NRIS includes 45 data elements for every listed property, but does not yet contain any free text fields. The IPS was developed by the National Park Service as a tool to facilitate the maintenance, use, and reporting of cultural resource data by deriving a variety of products from a single data entry effort. The initial list of significant properties was determined through a query of the NRIS for all listings encoded for "Ethnic Heritage/Black." The data on these properties were downloaded from the NRIS into the Survey and Inventory module of the IPS to create a sub-database on African American properties. The text of the significance synopses for the individual properties, written in WordPerfect, were then

merged with the modified data in IPS to create the reports that constitute the bulk of the book manuscript.

The other major portion of the book consists of essays on such topics as the Archeology of African America, African American migration, a personal perspective on the Civil Rights Movement, minority issues in historic preservation, women's history, social history, the arts, and a successful community preservation effort in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. These essays place the historic places described in the book into the larger contexts of American history. The authors were provided several types of information from the book database

to assist them in the preparation of their essays. Each essayist was provided property reports describing the National Register listings related to their subject area, frequency reports of indexing terms to identify what types of properties are registered and to discern patterns among them, and a comprehensive list of all the properties to indicate their range nationwide.

Since the establishment of the database for the book, we have answered numerous research ques-

tions relating to such diverse themes as the Underground Railroad, free Black cemeteries, African American colleges and universities, and Rosenwald Fund schools. Using the flexibility of the IPS as the tool to build upon the foundation of NRIS documentation, we have expanded our capability to provide more detailed information on African American historic properties in a variety of ways.

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The McComas Institute in Joppa stands as the single most important property in the history of Black education in Harford County, MD. Constructed in 1867, it is one of three area schools built by the Freedmen's Bureau after the Civil War, and the only one that survives intact. Photo by Natalie Shivers, courtesy National Register nomination documentation.